

Integrating the Aging Visually Handicapped Into Community Groups in New York City

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Abstract: Reports the results of a three-year funded project to integrate aging visually handicapped persons into community senior programs in three neighborhoods in New York City. Describes the project's structure, how groups are organized, site selection, the orientation of host center staff and members, activities, and transportation. A special program in an area nursing home is also described.

AGEBLD

■ In 1972, the New York Community Trust accepted a proposal submitted by Vacations and Community Services for the Blind (VCB) and provided a three-year grant to carry out the proposal's purpose: "to provide carefully structured opportunities for blind and visually impaired persons to participate fully with sighted senior citizens in social, recreational, and community service activities" in three communities, East New York, the North Bronx, and Williamsburg.

Cooperation of community centers in these communities was secured after some initial difficulty and groups of blind older adults were started at the Pink Houses Community Center (East New York), the Mosholu-Montefiore YM-YWHA (North Bronx), and the YM-YWHA of Williamsburg (Brooklyn).

In two of these centers, the program's acceptance was delayed by fear on the part of the agency authorities that hazards would be added to the operation of these centers such as insurance problems, discomfort (and possible loss) of old-time members, dangers for blind people inherent in the ways the buildings were laid out, etc. Underlying these fears was the unexpected personal discomfort of staff and board members in dealing with the blind.

Discomfort and uncertainty at the reception that might be given them affected blind members as well. As a means of dealing with the problem of overcrowded facilities, another agency, years earlier, had attempted to integrate blind and sighted people by referring blind people to community centers. This effort had not succeeded. Word about this failure had spread to blind people around the city; their suspicious attitude about efforts that seemed similar was therefore understandable.

INTEGRATION IS RESISTED BY SOME As stated in the proposal: "It would be naive to assume that the people who will make use of this service will all initially express an eager desire to become more involved with the sighted community. On the contrary, there will be strong resistance by some and total resistance by a few." The minority status generally given to blind people fosters in many of the latter the desire to withdraw from contacts with the sighted. One also finds a type of reverse prejudice resulting; e.g. "they don't want us, so why should we be made fools of."

Letters were sent to elderly blind persons known to the agency from its Vacation Camp for the Blind. Contributing to the initial positive response from some was their long-term association with the agency. For others, various excuses put off the decision to join. When it became evident that the group would continue, that a staff member would be assigned and would continue with the group, and that the experience of those already participating was positive, the groups filled up.

Other factors undoubtedly contributed to members' decisions to join. For example, the initial proposal stated: "Many blind people live alone as does much of the city's aged population. The group will initially provide relief from the isolation that is so prevalent." The problem of loneliness is widespread among the elderly blind and must be considered in assessing the success of a group. Much significance attaches to "getting out of the house" as an antidote to loneliness.

A blind person described this problem as follows: "when one becomes afflicted with the loss of sight, it's a chronic condition; your friends become tired of coming over to see

you. As a matter of fact, they walk away from you. You end up all alone. That's the time a person requires a little encouragement from the outside. —A little encouragement not to withdraw into himself, not to hide away from the world. That's the worst thing you can do—shut yourself away in the house and refuse to go out as usual. We feel that life is over. But life is *not* over." And so, the availability of the group, of companionship, of people with whom to talk and with whom to do things becomes important in and of itself.

VCB assigned workers to the three groups and orientation programs were developed for the staffs of the host centers and their senior citizen members. VCB's supervisory staff participated in these sessions which included a slide presentation demonstrating the varied interests and capabilities of blind people. Blind people were shown pursuing "people's" interests. The presentations highlighted similarities and showed the differences in perspective.

Blind group members also participated in some of these presentations and then answered questions which usually revealed the surprise and doubts of the questioners about blind people's abilities. Eventually, blind group members were organized into "speakers' bureaus" to make presentations before other community groups.

VCB Groups Were Supportive

The host agency's schedule of programs was read regularly to members of the VCB groups. As members evinced an interest in announced activities, they were encouraged by the leader to move out to the activity with the assistance of volunteers and to return to the group when they wished. Thus the VCB group continued to provide assured acceptance to its members while the latter tested themselves in the sighted settings. Eventually, some members developed associations with sighted contacts and found that they were at ease in either setting.

Some members, for reasons deeper than blindness, found themselves unable to make the move out of the VCB group. Yet, when opportunities arose for the entire VCB group to participate with other senior citizens in the hot luncheon program or in the monthly "birthday party" celebrations sponsored by all the centers, for example, they too shared in the enjoyment of these occasions.

MOVE TO NEW GROUPS In two instances, when it developed that the program of the host agency offered inadequate opportunities for integrated activities (i.e., not enough variety in the program), members of the group and the VCB staff member canvassed other possible locations in the area, and the groups moved to new centers.

Though fairly recent, the new locations have proved stimulating to the groups and have moved them ahead substantially. In one of these centers, a blind member is now a member of the Center's executive committee; members of the group are attending the centers on days other than when VCB is present; blind members have made presentations to a number of community groups. A local blind person, previously unknown to the agency, is a new group member. Sighted center members receive VCB members warmly. The center serves hot lunches and group members are able to take advantage of this service. Arrangements are being made for members to continue attending the center during the summer when the VCB program is suspended. A New York University student has

been assigned to the group by her college for fieldwork credit and she is assisting the VCB worker.

For the second of these groups, the move to a new center has also yielded very positive results. Members take advantage of the hot lunch program; one of the members has joined a center band; other VCB members entertain at center events; at dances, blind and sighted are dancing partners; a group member has had her poems printed in the center newspaper; social service problems of blind members have, in some instances, been handled by the center social worker, just like for other center members; occasionally, some members use the center on days other than when the VCB worker is present, particularly to attend the monthly birthday parties conducted by the center.

The latter group has been meeting in alternate weeks at a nursing home where resident and non-resident group members have become a close-knit group. Contacts between them are maintained by phone outside meeting times.

VARIETY OF JOINT PROGRAMS Typical joint programs have included discussions, newspaper readings, exercises, crafts, group singing, and dancing. One of the group members plays the piano for group singing in which members of the hospital staff often join. Several nurses come in to dance with members. An aide sings for the group. A doctor and a nurse sometimes come in to play the piano for the group.

Of particular interest is the effect that this program has had upon the Home, where interest has developed and grown for the provision of programs for the Home as a whole. It is also worth noting that seeing blind members in a healthy, involving situation seems to have had a salutary effect upon relationships between the staff of the Home and blind residents. No longer are the "safety" standards applied as rigidly as before when blind patients were kept immobilized in wheelchairs for non-medical reasons.

Another dimension to the Home experience is the opportunity it has provided for the non-resident blind members to give themselves meaningfully to others. One VCB member put it thus: "I used to feel so sorry for myself when I lost my sight. But now I realize that people in the Home are much worse off than me. They are so eager to have us come that it makes me feel good."

In both of the above settings, other community agencies have been referring blind persons for membership in the VCB groups. Community agencies have also used the VCB workers as resources for situations involving visual problems. Host agencies have been making schedule changes in their own programs to make it possible for blind VCB members to participate.

The third group, which meets in a Bronx center, has found it a particularly receptive setting. The host agency considers the VCB program as an integral part of its service to the community. The group is at capacity membership level and has a sizable waiting list. Attendance is consistently high. An adequate number of volunteers assist the group, one of whom leads some activities. Social work students help with arts and crafts activity, with discussions, and with resolution of concrete problems such as social security, medicare, medicaid, etc.

Two group members are representatives to the host agency's Nine Club Council of senior citizens. The council meets monthly on a day other than the VCB group's day and is regularly attended by the group's representatives.

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The latter make regular reports to their group and accept group recommendations for presentation to the council. The Red Cross provides transportation to council meetings and to monthly meetings of the Center's Cultural Committee which has two other group representatives.

SUMMER PROGRAM The group has presented educational and entertainment programs at meetings of the center's senior citizens. During the summer of 1974, the center provided a part-time staff person and funds for transportation so that the group could continue when VCB suspended its community program for the summer period. The center has also provided an arts and crafts specialist to work with group on a regular basis. On its own initiative, the center has prepared a proposal applying for transportation funds so that blind group members could attend the center on an additional day. On such a day, blind members would not meet as a group but would join various center activities as individuals. It is unlikely that such a possibility would have been considered, but for the security built up over the three-year period during which members have been meeting there with a VCB worker.

The progress achieved in this center points directions in which all VCB groups may eventually move. It can be seen, however, that the attitude of the host agency is vital to the goals of the program. The agency's readiness to help create a climate for progress is most evident in this center. Accepting the fact that blind persons should be included in the community population for whom the center makes its plans and establishes its program, sets the stage for the ultimate integration VCB is seeking.

“Open House” Programs

All of the groups plan “Open House” programs. Invitations are sent to local community leaders. Guests are informed about blindness and about the ability of blind people to overcome aspects of their handicaps. Tables display products blind members have made, such as knitted and sewn items, tile work, sculpture, etc. Aids and appliances that help blind people in daily living tasks are displayed and demonstrated. Baked and cooked items made by members of the groups are used as refreshments. A carousel projector shows slides of VCB group activities. Group members act as “greeters,” demonstrators, speakers, and masters of ceremonies.

The “Open House” programs represent a move toward involving local community leadership in the problem of integrating the blind and sighted in their communities. Staff workers have begun to use some of their time to visit other agencies and coordinate groups, leaders in the community, and service and fraternal groups to talk about the group and the goals of VCB. A slide presentation is shown to groups which depicts activities of blind people in the community centers and in camp. The agency's goal of gaining acceptance for blind people in community groups and institutions is stressed as is the need for volunteers to assist in the program.

ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS The first three years of the groups as described above have demonstrated that it is indeed possible for blind people to join in activities with the sighted, that progress can be made in overcoming many of the initial barriers to mutual acceptance of each other. Creating the appropriate climate appears to be a major consideration and, in this task, a number of elements appear to be necessary. Among these elements is the existence of a desire on the part of the host agency to do more than to discharge an “obligation,” i.e., to regard the problem as theirs, as well as that of the blind service agency. The availability of program activities into which blind people can fit, i.e., a varied program to allow for varied interests, is also necessary. It is helpful to set aside time in the early stages of the relationship for orientation to staff and to sighted center members.

Opportunities for joint activity between blind and sighted members should involve occasions when the sighted are included in activities originated by the group of blind people. Members of the blind group should be involved in shaping the program, in developing the “open house” activity, in taking leadership in carrying it out and in making joint appearances with the VCB worker before center membership groups and before community groups.

It is understood that some of the criteria noted above require work before they can be realized. In other cases, however, if the setting initially selected for the group does not meet some of the requirements stated above, the group should be prepared to seek and move to another community setting. If there is a relatively limited program, for example, joint activity is less possible.

Joint activity, as has been stated, can be achieved. “Integration,” however, is a longer-term task and no claim can be made for its having been achieved as yet in the three centers mentioned. Part of the explanation for this lies in the community patterns that pertain to the blind and in the social constructs that seem to be part of the present culture.

Our belief, however, is strengthened, that blind persons ought to be and can be integrated with the sighted. Meeting the needs of blind persons who are members of a community should be part of total planning by the community. An adequate pattern of community services, in our view, should provide that blind persons are not excluded from services available to others on a non-specialized basis. While there continues to be an important role for the specialized agency, services open to the community in general ought also to be available to blind persons. We will continue our work toward these goals.

